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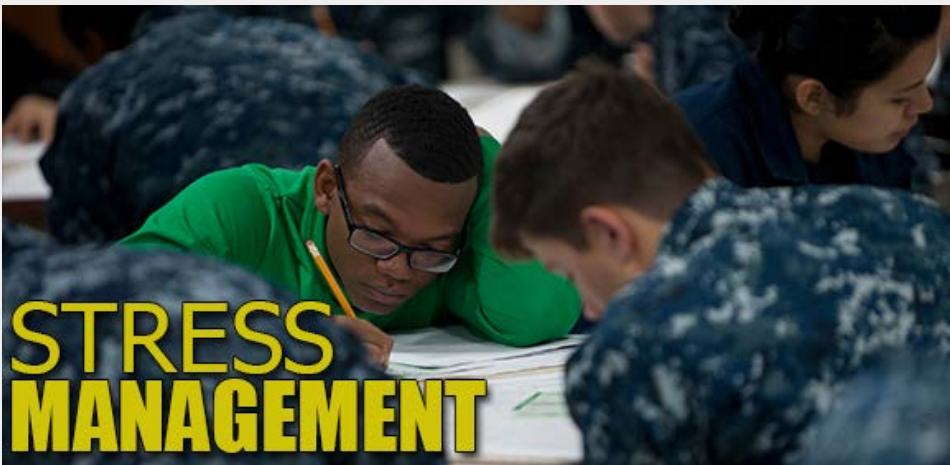
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# Resilience: A State of Mind or Dispositional State?

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By Lt. Cmdr. Robert Lippy, clinical psychologist, USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70)



Logistics Specialist Seaman Nathaniel Ford takes the third class petty officer advancement exam on the mess decks aboard the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70). Carl Vinson is underway conducting unit-level training off the coast of Southern California. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class George M. Bell/Released)

What is resilience? Is it the same as stress management? Although defined differently by various authors, resilience is simply ‘bouncing back’ from difficult experiences. It is a process of adapting and responding well in the face of adversity, challenge, trauma, loss or stress. But what is it that allows some people to respond well to adversity and others to struggle?


Most of us have witnessed this phenomenon. I certainly wonder about this with the Sailors that come into my office as the ship’s psychologist on the USS Carl Vinson. Make no mistake, life on an aircraft carrier (any naval ship really) is stressful! But why is it that some (fortunately most) sailors seem to do fine adjusting to this arduous lifestyle and others do not?


The surprising news to me was learning that that wellbeing (aka “happiness”) is actually a relatively stable human trait. Research has shown that somewhere between 50-80% of subjective well-being can be attributed to genetics (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). In other words, most people seem to have a relatively stable range of happiness. Happiness may fluctuate over time depending on different life circumstances, but tends to remain within a set range. The good (not so surprising) news is that consistent with popular belief, happiness does not seem to depend on external material things. Research has consistently shown that factors


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such as socioeconomic status, education, income, or marital status account for less than three percent of the variance in wellbeing. In other words, it is really true that “money can’t buy happiness.”

But, this knowledge still does not explain why some people seem to be resilient in even the toughest of circumstances while others falter. Early researchers believed that people who were able to respond well to significant challenges, trauma and adversity possessed some type of extraordinary abilities. Much research was conducted on these so called “invincibles” or “invulnerables.” (Pines, 1975). Again, research has shown what many have long believed to be true. For example, children raised by competent parents (e.g., caring, supportive, authoritative) tend to demonstrate resilient coping and to be relatively free of psychopathology (Dubow et al., 1997). Moreover, higher intellectual functioning is a consistent strong correlate of resilience, as is higher socioeconomic status (Masten, 2001). Of course, these factors are largely beyond most individuals’ control.

However, accumulated research on resilience has concluded that resilience is a relatively common phenomenon (some good news). Masten (2001) concluded that resilience results in most cases from “basic human adaptational systems” (p 227). What the author meant is that resilience is simply based on common healthy caregiver-child relationships, the ability to self regulate emotions and behavior, and through active engagement in one’s environment.

Much of the current research on resilience started with two University of Chicago researchers named Kobasa and Maddi who studied the tumultuous breakup of Illinois Bell Telephone in the mid 1970’s from federal deregulation laws. What they found is that although most of the employees of this large corporation suffered significant emotional turmoil from this upheaval, there were a many employees who not only successfully managed this significant stressor, but actually thrived from it. These initial studies lead to a series of studies on the factors of resilience. The authors summarized their findings in what they call “Hardiness” (Kobasa, 1979). People high in hardiness possess certain attitudes and skills that help them successfully manage stressful events: commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment involves interest and involvement in one’s environment. People that are high in commitment actively seek purpose in their activities and are robustly engaged in their life. Control involves individuals’ perception of having control to influence their environment. Challenge involves individuals finding value in learning from their environment, from both the positive and the negative events. The authors further found that these hardiness skills could be learned, sometimes in as little as a 15-hour workshop (Maddi, 1987).

So what can we learn from all of the research conducted thus far? It seems that with respect to resilience, some individuals are either born with or fortunate enough to have experienced some stable correlates of resilience (e.g., high intellectual functioning, nurturing parental relationships, higher socioeconomic status). Fortunately though every one of us can learn and enhance our resilience based on the collective knowledge of research. The following is a summary of a variety of ways to build resiliency:

- **Create and build connections with others.** Research consistently shows that strong social connections with family, friends, and coworkers is important to managing stress. Asking for and accepting help is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of courage. Volunteering and/or helping others in need is a great way of getting ‘outside ourselves’ and refocusing on the bigger picture to help us through times of challenge.
- **Actively try to view life circumstances in positive ways.** Avoid engaging in repetitive self-focused rumination; this type of negative thinking does nothing but make you more miserable. The sobering truth is that we have little to no control of others and many of the realities of our world. However, we do have control over the way we interpret, think about, and respond to our environment. Resilient people tend to see adversity as an opportunity to learn about themselves and grow.

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- **Endeavor to be skilled at what you do.** Having confidence about one's abilities and skills not only helps individuals through stressful times, but is also strongly associated with happiness. Some authors have written about cultivating "flow" in your work, which can be a kind of "Zen-like" state in which a person is totally absorbed in their work in a peaceful and pleasant way.
- **Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Research has shown that positive emotions are a critical aspect of resilience. Positive emotions can help expand and improve the way individuals cope during times of adversity or stress. It may seem odd to intentionally invoke positive emotions during times of crises, stress, or loss, but it is a powerful and effective way of taking control of your attitude and your mood. You can cultivate positive emotions through positive visual imagery or by engaging in fun and enjoyable activities.
- **Learn from past adversity.** Think about past stressful experiences and what you did to get through those difficult times. What was helpful and allowed you to cope? Were there certain people you reached out to for help or advice? How did you think about past adversity that allowed you to gain a wider perspective?
- **Use humor.** There is a saying in the military that one can use humor as a "flack jacket" against stress. Humor is a tremendous resiliency resource. It helps gain perspective on stressful circumstances (i.e., to see the bigger picture). Humor also releases endorphins, which are the brain's natural 'feel good' hormone.
- **Move toward your goals.** Research has also shown that well-being is enhanced when people set specific goals that are realistic and attainable (i.e., not too high and not too low), intrinsic (personally vs. externally derived), and valued by one's culture.
- **Use spirituality or faith.** Faith is a great resource in the face of adversity. Many resilient individuals turn to their faith through prayer, service, or consultation with their spiritual leaders to help cope with loss or stressful times.
- **Take care of yourself.** A close friend and colleague of mine was fond of saying with regard to coping: "Go for what is good for you, and stay away from what is bad for you." Good/healthy coping includes things like exercise, getting a balanced and healthy diet, getting good sleep, engaging in relaxing activities, and socializing with others. Obvious negative or unhealthy coping includes such things as alcohol, drugs, excessive spending or gambling, or other risky activities that can have harmful or painful consequences.

The bottom line is that although there are many individual differences in resilience, there are many things that we can do to successfully cope with stress. However, coping and resilience are active processes. You must commit yourself to taking an active stance in handling your stress. The more you practice the coping attitudes and skills discussed here, the more resilient you will become.

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